

Statement by Congressman Greg Walden

October 20, 2005

Subcommittees on Health, and Environment and Hazardous Materials

"Comprehensively Combating Methamphetamines: Impacts on Health and the Environment."

Chairman Deal, Chairman Gillmor and members of the subcommittees, I greatly appreciate your willingness to conduct today's hearing to focus on the critical issues involved with the production, trafficking and use of methamphetamine. As you know, this is an issue of great concern to me, and I thank you for allowing me to participate.

I've long supported federal efforts to more closely examine these issues that profoundly affect children, families and communities across my district in Oregon, and I'm pleased that Congress, and in particular this committee, is taking a serious look at the multitude of health, environment, and judicial issues meth causes.

Just last week I was pleased to host Chairman Mark Souder and the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources in my rural district for a very successful field hearing in Umatilla County – the most severely meth-affected county in Oregon. At the hearing we heard from a broad cross section of witnesses who discussed the effects of meth in Oregon and around the Pacific Northwest.

Speakers representing the Drug Enforcement Administration and regional HIDTA offices as well as state and local law enforcement, treatment, prevention and community groups shared stories about their roles on the front lines in the war against meth. Oregon's HIDTA Director, Chuck Karl, reminded us during his testimony that, while meth is new in some regions of the country, it has long been a problem in the Pacific Northwest. He also echoed sentiments I've heard time and time again, calling crystal meth the "single most damaging drug" he's faced in more than 30 years in law enforcement.

The market for meth in the Northwest is now dominated by Mexican organizations that manufacture it outside the United States and traffic it up major distribution routes, but rural areas, like those I represent in eastern, southern and central Oregon, have been, and continue to be, home to disproportionate numbers of small toxic labs that pose immediate health and safety risks to children of meth cooks, local law enforcement officials and the environment.

For these reasons, I support legislation to focus on the problem internationally and domestically. I am a cosponsor of the Combat Meth Act, which includes provisions to regulate domestic sales of precursor chemicals, and the Methamphetamine Epidemic Elimination Act, which includes restrictions on international transfers and wholesale sales of these chemicals, as well as provisions to enhance criminal penalties for meth production and trafficking, especially where children are affected.

I'm also a cosponsor of legislation to increase community awareness, establish treatment options, provide resources to clean up the toxic waste that meth production leaves behind and give law enforcement and the judicial system additional tools they need to go after those who manufacture and traffic the drug.

Equally important to these efforts in Washington D.C. are the establishment and strengthening of partnerships between federal drug enforcement agencies and state and local professionals. Federal assistance from programs like HIDTA and Byrne/Justice Assistance Grants is critical to the outstanding local efforts already underway around the country. Early last month, Umatilla County was named a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, a designation that provides additional federal focus for Oregon's east side. Law enforcement in the area has already begun to draw down on the first installment of federal funds, and I look forward to seeing how this critical support from the federal government will make a difference in disrupting drug trafficking organizations whose effects are felt across the region.

I've made a point of hearing from community leaders about the challenges they face in the battle to rid our communities of this terrible drug, and earlier this year I sponsored a series of seven community town hall forums with local and state stakeholders. These forums afforded me an excellent opportunity to learn about counter-drug efforts already underway and to raise awareness about the issue in the communities I represent. The problems meth causes in my rural district are substantial, but the efforts of state and local enforcement agencies, as well as treatment and prevention providers, are truly outstanding. I invite all members of this committee to visit Oregon's Second District to see firsthand the good work underway and how additional federal assistance could be put to work.

I am also proud that Oregon has been at the forefront in the fight against meth, implementing innovative strategies and making difficult choices to mitigate the effects of this poison statewide. After hearing requests from law enforcement, the judicial system, families and communities in crisis, the governor and the state legislature have taken decisive action that makes it much more difficult to obtain chemicals necessary to cook meth. Specifically, the availability of pseudoephedrine, a key precursor chemical for the production of meth that is readily accessible in over-the-counter decongestants has been significantly controlled.

Since these restrictions were implemented, the number of meth labs and dumpsites secured by law enforcement has fallen substantially as meth cooks have had greater difficulty obtaining precursor chemicals. Law enforcement secured only 119 meth labs and dumpsites in the first half of 2005 compared to 271 in 2004, a reduction of over 56% according to information from the Oregon Department of Justice.

While these results are heartening, it is unfortunate that enacting these sorts of laws in select states will only shift the problem elsewhere, not eliminate it. In light of this, I look forward to continued work with my colleagues from across the country and officials I've worked with in the administration, including Scott Burns of ONDCP and Joseph

Rannazzisi from the DEA, who is testifying today, to combat meth by strangling the supply of meth and those precursor ingredients that are diverted to illicit use, on the international market and within our borders.

I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues here and dedicated Oregonians, including the statewide Methamphetamine Task Force—a group of local leaders from law enforcement, treatment, prevention and children’s services from around the state—to further develop solutions that reduce availability of the drug in our communities and provide appropriate services for those who are affected. The feedback and suggestions I’ve received from those on the front lines in this effort have been exceedingly valuable in telling the story of meth’s destructive power. While much work remains, by working together at the federal, state and local level we will continue to make progress to rid our communities of this scourge.

Thank you again Chairman Deal and Chairman Gillmor for bringing this issue to the forefront. I look forward to working you as the committee explores further legislative options.